Walk Four

Deepdale and God's Bridge

From Bowes 8 miles (12.9km)

Bowes Castle

This walk includes a Norman castle and an infamous school. After a trek across wild moorland, we reach the river Greta, crossing it via God's Bridge. The return along the Greta allows us to study the incredible diversity of the area's flora and fauna; the scenery is outstanding.

Bowes occupies a strategic position at the entrance to the bleak and isolated Stainmore Pass, which has been an important trading route across the Northern Pennines for thousands of years. Finds of a flat bronze axe and a stone battleaxe at Bowes suggest that the pass was in use during the Early Bronze Age, *c.* 1500 BC. The route became a vital military link during the Roman occupation of Britain from AD 43 to AD 410.

Bowes Castle was founded by Conan the Little, Earl of Richmond *c.* 1136 and completed 1171–87 for Henry II. However, it was more a garrisoned outpost and watchtower than a residential fortress. The castle consisted of a solitary keep that stood without the protection of curtain walls, with a rectangular ditch enclosure providing its only outer defence. In 1322, marauding Scots led by Robert the Bruce besieged the castle, after which it fell into disuse. The castle stands in the north-west corner of the Roman fort, Lavatrae, the Latin word for 'summit'. The fort, constructed in the first century AD to guard the eastern approaches to the Stainmore Pass, covered an area of four acres (1.6ha).

A Roman legion famous for its Spanish horses occupied the fort. Tradition holds that towards the end of the Roman occupation of Britain, the garrison stationed there raided the local villages and stole all their gold and other valuables. The enraged locals banded together and stormed the fort, slaughtering the entire garrison. However, the locals could not recover their possessions as the Romans had already hidden their booty. The ghostly apparitions of the garrison reputedly appear on the anniversary of the massacre, ritually burying their ill-gotten gains!

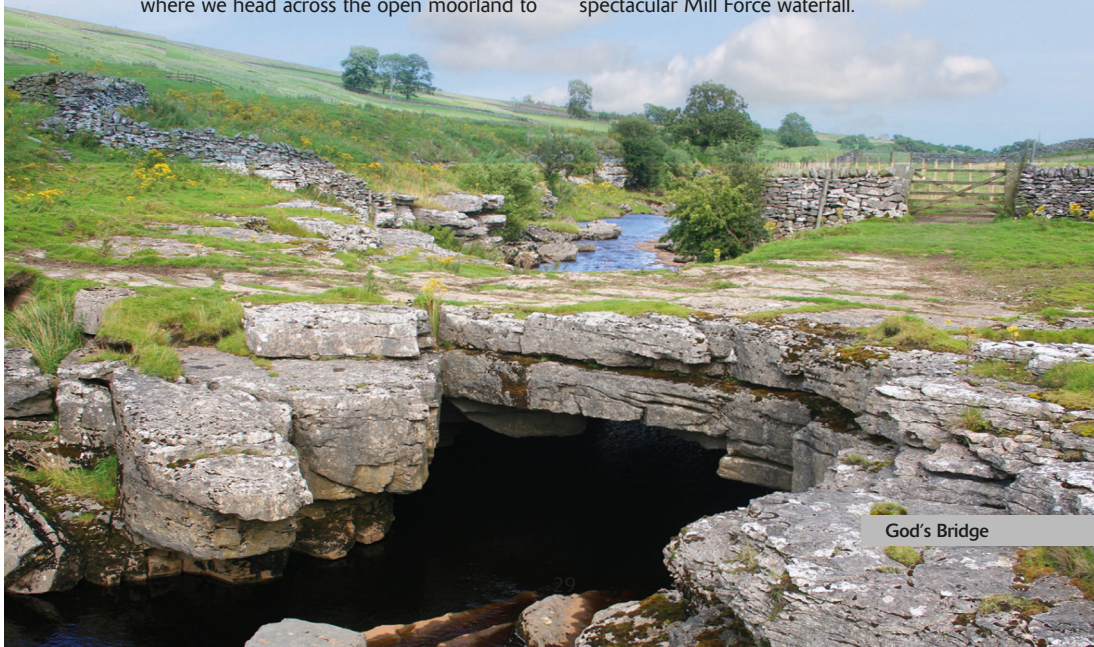
In 1838, Charles Dickens visited the Bowes Academy, a private school for boys run by William Shaw, to ascertain if the disturbing stories about the Yorkshire schools were true. Dickens had heard the tales of 'boy farms' and 'prison schools' where some parents sent their unwanted sons. The boys were kept in squalid conditions, almost starved and often beaten. Appalled by his findings, Dickens exposed these barbaric institutions in his novel *Nicholas Nickleby*. The school became Dotheboys Hall, with William Shaw portrayed as the infamous Wackford Squeers. This caused a public outcry and forced the closure of many such schools, including the Bowes Academy in 1842.

After passing Dotheboys Hall, we cross the busy A66 bypass and follow the Bowes Loop of the Pennine Way. Along this road, warning signs mark the site of RAF Bowes Moor, a chemical weapons storage unit during World War Two. After the war, the RAF disposed of these offensive weapons by burning them in situ. The site closed in 1947, but RAF Bomb Disposal squads discovered stocks of mustard gas in 1997 during the site's preparation for sale to a private buyer.

Although the Bowes Loop passes through this poison gas factory, our route continues along the service road to West Stony Keld, where we head across the open moorland to Pasture End. A subway provides a safe crossing of the A66, and we descend across the trackbed of the former Stainmore Trans-Pennine Railway to God's Bridge. The line opened in 1862 and linked Darlington and Barnard Castle with Tebay. Before its closure in 1962, this was England's highest railway, with a maximum elevation of 1370 feet (418m) at the Stainmore summit.

At God's Bridge, the river Greta flows under a massive slab of limestone spanning about 16 feet (5m) and of sufficient width for its former use as a drovers' road. The bridge is a Site of Special Scientific Interest, cited as the finest example of a natural bridge over an active river in the UK. Unless in spate, the Greta seeps into a parallel shallow cave development near the bridge and reappears further downstream.

From God's Bridge, the route follows the river Greta's course to an eighteenth-century packhorse bridge, which provides access to East Mellwaters. This bridge may have once carried the road up the valley and over the Stainmore Pass. The return to Bowes has some excellent views of Bowes Castle and passes the confluence of the river Greta and Sleightholme Beck. The last mile hugs the riverside, and a slight detour reveals the spectacular Mill Force waterfall.



God's Bridge

DEEPDALE AND GOD'S BRIDGE

Start/Parking:	The Parish Hall car park, Bowes, **DL12 9HU**. To the left of the mini-roundabout, or in the lay-by just outside the village to the east.
Location:	Bowes is situated 15½ miles (25km) west of Scotch Corner off the A66 road and 5 miles (8km) from Barnard Castle.
Grid Ref:	NY 99600 13483. **what3words:** ///composes.superhero.enter
Distance:	8 miles (12.9km) circular. Allow 4¼ hrs walking time.
Total Ascent:	441 feet (134m). **Maximum Elevation:** 1195 feet (364m).
OS Maps:	Explorer OL31 (1:25,000) or Landranger 92 (1:50,000).
Refreshments:	Bowes: The Ancient Unicorn, none en route.
Public Toilets:	None en route, nearest Barnard Castle.

1 **996134** From the car park, walk uphill to the mini roundabout. Turn left and follow the main street through Bowes, passing the Ancient Unicorn, the Post Office and St Giles Church.

2 **993135** Turn left at the church to visit the keep of Bowes Castle. Return to the main street and follow the road out of the village, passing Dotheboys Hall. Cross the bridge over the A66 bypass and follow the road uphill over Tute Hill to its demise at West Stoney Keld.

NB: The ascent of Tute Hill lacks charm and beauty; Alfred Wainwright described it thus: 'This is the ugliest mile of all and the only concern to walkers is to pass by quickly.'

3 **972152** Go through the gate and turn left onto a clear stone track *(SP Pasture End 2m)*. Continue along the track to a waymark post (just after crossing Ellers Sike). Turn left, leave the track and climb up to a waymark post on the hilltop.

4 **969146** Bear right and follow a clear green track through the heather, heading towards another waymark post adjacent to a line of grouse butts.

5 **966144** Continue straight ahead, passing below a bield *(a short section of wall with a cross wall)*. Keeping roughly to the same level follow a narrow track passing below another bield. After passing two waymarked stones, turn left towards a waymark post.

6 **960137** From the post, continue to the wall, turn right and keeping in line with the wall, follow a faint track to the wall corner..

7 **955130** Turn left and descend towards a gate adjacent to the A66. STOP at the gate and turn right *(sign Pennine Way via underpass 200 metres)*. Follow the fence around and go through a gate. Descend left and go through the underpass. Go through a gate, turn left through another gate and follow the left wall across the field.

8 **956128** Turn right *(SP Pennine Way)* and descend a clear track winding down through a gate to cross God's Bridge. Turn left and go through a gate.

9 **957126** Bear left and follow the river Greta downstream through two fields.

NB: This purpose built path allows wheelchair users to explore the area around Mellwaters to enjoy the scenery and wildlife.

10 **959127** The public right of way bears right away from the river, but it remains on a good surface and returns to the riverside at the next field. Follow the river downstream through two fields to reach the farm lane at East Mellwaters.

11 **968129** Go through two gates crossing the farm road. Continue via another gate and follow the right wall to Cardwell Bridge.

12 **972128** Cross Sleightholme Beck via the footbridge and head to the left of the farm buildings at West Charity Farm. Go through a gate *(SP Pennine Way)* and pass through the farmyard. A good farm road leads through the fields past Lady Myres Farm.

13 **982130** Leave the farm road via a gate on the left and descend to the bottom centre of the field to a footbridge. Cross the footbridge.

14 **984131** Follow the riverbank downstream and climb up to join an enclosed track leading to Swinholme Farm. The track improves as we pass the farmhouse and becomes a tarmac surface just before going through a gate.

15 **987134** Cross a wooden step-stile in the right fence, bear right and descend towards the river. Cross a wooden step-stile and follow the riverbank downstream to Gilmonby Bridge, passing above the striking waterfall of Mill Force.

16 **996132** Turn left and follow the road to the village hall car park. If using the layby continue to the roundabout and turn right.

EAST MELLWATERS FARM

East Mellwaters has been in an Environmental Stewardship Scheme for over thirty years; this careful management helps to protect natural grassland, which benefits some of the less common species of birds and wildflowers.

The farm's holiday cottages cater to disabled people, and it has around four miles of paths designed for wheelchairs or 'buggy' use, which allow visitors to enjoy the spectacular scenery.